



The Body as a Weapon and Resisting the Politics of Patriarchy: Rewriting Female Agency in “*Draupadi*” and *Beloved*

Mir Aspak Ali

Department of English, Bhatner College, Dantan affiliated with Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India

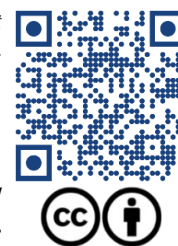
aspakali632@gmail.com

Received: 02 Mar 2026; Received in revised form: 04 Apr 2026; Accepted: 08 Apr 2026; Available online: 11 Apr 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *In contemporary feminist discourse, the politics of subjugation remains one of the significant concerns in relation to the tribal and slave women who have endure trauma, violence and systematic oppression. This study explore how the female body functions both as a position of subjugation and as a medium of resistance, particularly in Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” and Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Moving from victim centered analysis; the paper relocates these narratives within intersectional, postcolonial and feminist perspective to examine how the ideological institutions such as nation, racial slavery, and patriarch domination groups are attempt to systematically exploits marginalized female bodies. Drawing upon the theories of Judith Butler concept of ‘gender performativity’ and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s terms of ‘subaltern’, the study argues that the function of trauma not only as an evidence of oppression but also a shape of political expression. In Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi”, Dopdi Mehjen’s rape and her refusal to cloth herself transforming her vulnerable body into a form of resistance against the authority. Similarly in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Sethe’s act of infanticide challenging the traditional norms of motherhood and it also reflects the trauma of slavery. Through the comparison of tribal uprising in Indian context with the experience of an enslaved African American mother, this study demonstrates how body is reshaped into a form weapon it personified through which female subjects challenges to patriarchal structure and reconstitutes the structure of oppressive regime of slavery and violence through their bodily act of defiance.*



Keywords— *Female body, Patriarchal domination, Subaltern, Trauma, Violence, Tribal, Slavery.*

Widely regarded within feminist discourse, the female body has been treated as a contested upon which patriarchal ideology inscribes to domination, oppressed and discipline. Colonial administration, patriarchal society, racial capitalism and militant nationalism assemble to control female identity, sexuality, corporeality and gender inequality. But in literature raised the questions against such ideologies by transforming the body from an inactive site of oppressed into an dynamic energetic position of resistance. As what one of the renowned Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie observe that, in her essay “*We Should All Be Feminists*”(2014), she claim about the

women empowerment ‘the fiercest opponents of women's liberation believe that feminism is a social movement aimed at reversing gender roles and making men inferior’. The paper argues that in Mahasweta Devi’s “*Draupadi*” and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the infringed female body does not remain in the domain of marginalization, subjugation and inequality but it emerged as a weapon in which subjugated and helpless women challenge and decentralize the patriarchal autonomy.

Simultaneously these narratives primarily involves in the brutal violence and physical molestation within two distinct context in postcolonial India and the trauma of

slavery in 19th century America, where sovereign authority asserts to control the lives and deaths of women, but the female protagonists Sethe and Dopdi Mehjen by challenging the conventional notion of patriarchal structure, motherhood and resistance. Their acts reshaping the trauma not as silence anguish yet as a way of political articulation. By illustrating through postcolonial, intersectional and feminist framework, this paper will attempt to examine that these stories within the extensive frameworks of performativity, marginalization and Subalternity to demonstrate how the body becomes both the site of inscription and on the other side as a the forms of rebellion.

Generally, both texts are set against the backdrop of major historical events. For instance, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is situated within the context of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which legitimized the capture and return of escaped enslaved to their masters during the 19th century in America. The novel unveils, where the enslaves were far away from dignity and independence. Within the colonial structure the position of women as vulnerable, as they were mentally and physically controlled or exploits by the institution of slavery. Similarly in Mahasweta Devi's "*Draupadi*" is set against the backdrop of the 'Naxalite Movement' (1967) and the 'Bangladesh Liberation War' (1971). Where marginalized communities, particularly the Santali women, are being brutally rape and exploited by military forces and local authorities. The subjugation of the female body is clearly reflects in these texts, and it also expose the long historical of patriarchal structure to depict the women as weak. As the French feminist Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), refers to the ancient philosopher Pythagoras's statements about the history of women, "*There is a good principle that created order, light and man, and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman*" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011). This statement clearly recount that the women were traditionally associated with weak and undignified. Therefore within the structure of male dominance the female body were portraying as a site of suffering, marginalizing, and loss of individuality.

In the story of Mahasweta Devi's "*Draupadi*", the protagonist Dopdi Mehjan within the context of the uprising movement, where tribal bodies are depicted as disposable in the sense of state power. The postcolonial nation yet it apparently emancipated from the colonial regime, but imitates colonial practice of monitoring, violence, sexual abused, and cruelty. Dopdi is exemplified as political anarchist and her imprisonment is not simply as arrest, rather it becomes an act of authoritative assertion. Dopdi's rape in police custody is embodies by articulating what Achille Mbembe used the term

"necropolitics" to define how social and political power control over life and death, in which the life of marginalized people were systematically pushed into annihilation and violation of law and order.

In this sense Dopdi's body is torture by the government officials because it signifying the dual identities on the one side as female and other side as tribal identity. The authorities observed her body not simply as an individual being, but it symbolically represents through which authority can be affirmed over both the difference of ethnic and gender identity. So the State's intention is not only to punish the criminal but as an exemplary, however trying to impose the patriarchal structure of subjugation, through the presentation of public violence. After repeatedly rape and torture, she is attained before Senanayak, officer in charge of the operation. Instead of surrender herself to the officer, try to dominant upon her, Dopdi refuse to cloth herself. This act of rejection changes her vulnerable body shaping into defiance. As she standing naked alone and laughing and encountering the officer directly, this act of courage actually challenges the structure of authority, and she asking: "*What more can you do? Come on, counter me—come on, counter me?*" (Spivak, 402). At this moment her naked body is clearly highlighted as defeat or disgrace, which visualizes the cruelty of patriarchy and how she defeats the power throughout her daring activity.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's concept of 'gender performativity', the role of the female is determined by traditional social norms such as familial responsibility, domestic labor, profound distaste and socially ostracized and they are completely victimized in the realms of gender identity, that can be constructed and regulate by the society's expectations and patriarchal mechanism. And in the case of Dopdi, when she refuses to clothe herself before the gender mechanism, which symbolically violates the rules of social structure that seeks to self-restrain and protect the female virtue. This act of courage actually transforming her from the very evidence of repression and reshaping into a form of rebellious figure against the structure of authority that pushed into silence. In this story when Dopdi stand and remove her cloth before the officer Senanayak, this audacious activity making her as a fearless defiance actually challenges the ideology of state apparatus, which unfolds the broken dominance of authority. Dopdi's body is portraying at one level as an object of subjugation and punishment and later it becomes as a site of resistance and defiance, her body becomes as an emerging voice and a hope for subaltern especially the tribal community. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates about the subaltern voice in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" "*the*

subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p.287), suggesting that subaltern groups are wholly excluded from the society in the realms of class, culture and gender, they do not have the rights to questioning against the oppressive regime, they are under the burden of colonial shadow. And in the case of Dopdi's, her final gesture suggesting that she never surrender her body before the tyrannical power, instead her naked body takes the shape of weapon to disrupt the structure of colonial regime, becomes a powerful voice for the marginalized community especially the women.

Toni Morrison's writings overtly invoke the politics of female body and the subjugation of black women. Morrison was hardly the first non-white, to challenge the hegemony of the white-male center or the slave masters. She was an American novelist and most of her works primarily deal with black women's subjectivity. Particularly those who have endure under the trauma of slavery, marginalization, sexual exploitation, and female subjugation by the slave masters. Her prominent works are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987). Many of her works chiefly concern the dehumanized condition of black women during slavery. Therefore, her novel *Beloved* is perfectly exposes the brutal reality of slavery and female subjugation under the patriarchal domination. When she accepted Frederic G. Melcher Book Award for *Beloved* on October 12, 1988, Morrison said that "[t]here is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby" honoring the memory of the human beings forced into slavery. *Beloved* is heavily influenced by the past and its memory. Within the context of female subjugation and the politics of body, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is perfectly portrayed the condition of the slave mother. In which Sethe an enslaved mother and also the central victim of this narrative particularly in the African American slavery. Where the Black people are effectively driven into the system of slavery, in which the authority dominating over the lives of Black enslaved.

In a similar way *Draupadi*, and *Beloved* are belongs to two distinct narratives but here interconnected models of resistance articulated through the women body. When Dopdi resists through her bodily exposure and also in the case of Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which Sethe resists through her refusal to surrender to the slave master. *Beloved* focuses on dehumanized treatment of slavery, particularly the Black bodies struggle to survive. Within the structure of slavery, the authority is functioned as the ultimate regime in which the authorities control over their lives. Sethe's body is injured by lashing and beating, and the moments situate within the novel it as "chokecherry tree", which signifies that the brutality is shaping the

forms of grotesque elegance. The scar on her body is not only symbolizes the physical suffering, rather it also highlights as a historical artifact of racial violence. Thus both texts expose that the female body as an emerging site of defiance and resistance against the brutal institution of slavery and dominance.

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the most tragic incident occurs when Sethe's kills her own child in order to protect her from the institution of slavery. She thinks that death is the only way to protect her daughter from cruelty of slave institution. As she asks "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe"(p-193). Within the context of slavery, the notion of protection is metaphorically presented in death rather than relationships. On this distressing moment, Morrison objects the traditional notion of motherhood that relates with care and love. But this narrative also highlights how the image of motherhood is converted into an attempt for defense and survival. Her refusal to surrender her own daughter to the slave master, however her maternal authority is opposed to the brutal colonial regime. Her terrible act of killing signifies to challenge the system of slavery, in which the women bodies become a product of exploitation and subjugation. As she declares "if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her"(Beloved 21). Illustrating this, Morrison's novel exposes Sethe is not simply as an offender rather she is tragic victim within the slavery, her frightening act of violence arise in a very complex way of psychological and moral burden from the institution of slavery.

Through the lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, it refers to how the women overlapping the system of oppression and ideology of manhood. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's decision is shaped by overlapping against the system of slavery. Her suffering not only reduces to gender alone, rather it emerges from class, race and trauma of slavery. Within the context of slavery the women bodies are subjected to sexual violation, marginalized and exploitation. However, Sethe's decision to kill her daughter becomes a tragic act that challenges not only the system of slavery but also the traditional concept of motherhood itself. Her choice of death over enslavement asserts to breaking authoritative structure of slavery and states a site of female agency within the oppressive regime.

CONCLUSION

In an age of violence women have faced various discrimination, particularly those who belongs to marginalized communities have face sexual exploitation, caste and racial oppression. The patriarchal structure

imposed their authority in the name of equality, justice and law. However the marginalized communities’ such as tribal and the black women often lack the social and institution dignity in relation to discrimination. Moreover, both texts are situated within the context of the politics of the female body, at the center of these narratives, the protagonists cross over the geography and cultural boundaries. In Mahasweta Devi’s story “Draupadi” the portrayal of Dopdi within the postcolonial framework of state violence, where the government officials exploit the tribal women. Similarly in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, seek to represents the brutal reality of slavery in American context, where the Black women are systematically exploited and subjugated. Together both narratives reveal how patriarchal institution structurally operates the female body. Through rape, sexual exploitation, and abuse the female body, in a very conventional way the patriarchal authority control over female body.

As Kate Millett defines in “*Sexual Politics*”, about the patriarchal ideology what she calls “the birthright priority whereby males rule female”. This is the traditional ideology of patriarchy that has been constructed by society to depict the marginalized communities such as the tribal and the black women. Consequently male holds the power and claiming, sexually and biologically superior on the basis of gender. Society therefore reinforces this hierarchy in a very systematic way to control and abusing the female bodies. Thus, the female protagonists like Dopdi and Sethe reshape or challenges against this mechanism of control by transforming into a function of refusal and resistance. Their act of defiance challenging the structure of patriarchy and reconsider the ideological perception of the female body. Therefore their resistance allows the female body to emerge as an influential medium of protest for the marginalized women and also opposing the patriarchal forms of dominance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beauvoir, S. de. (1949/2011). *The second sex*. Vintage Feminism.
- [2] Bhattacharjee, S. (2020). Re-fashioning the mythical Draupadi: A critical study of Saoli Mitra’s
- [3] *Nathabati Anathabat. Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, 5(1).
- [4] Chakravarty, R. (2023). *Mahasweta Devi: Writer, activist, visionary*. Routledge.
- [5] Evans, M. (1982). *The woman question: Readings on the subordination of women*. Fontana.
- [6] Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*. Pantheon Books.
- [7] Makall, L. N. (2005). *Milk matters: Contemporary representations of breast-giving, property, and the self*. University of Texas.
- [9] Manikanda, G. (2018). Mahasweta Devi as a socio-political activist: A study. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field (IJIRMF)*, 4(10).
- [10] Mand Josephine Aruna, M., & Marie, D. (2021). Draupadi: India’s first daughter—the precursor of Indian feminist ideology. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 9(1).
- [11] Mao, W., & Zhang, M. (2009). *Beloved* as an oppositional gaze. *Canadian Center of Science and Education (CCSE)*, 2(3).
- [12] Millet, K. (2016). *Sexual politics*. Columbia University Press.
- [13] Mohapatra, A. K. (2011). *Sambalpur studies in literatures and cultures*. Sambalpur University.
- [14] Mondal, S. (2023). Rejuvenating the voiceless women entities: Re-writing Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Culture (JMRC)*, 3(1).
- [15] Patil, P. B. (2019). Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*: Representing voice for the voiceless. *LangLit*, 1(2).
- [16] Pohana, T., & Biswas, S. (2021). Marginalization in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 9(2).
- [17] Prayer Elmo Raj, P. (2018). Female body as site of resistance in *Draupadi*. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 6(1).
- [18] Ray Sinha, K. (2021). Violence on women and its resistance: A comparative study of Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Bride* and Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 9(4).
- [19] S., A. (2021). Collective trauma and postmemory in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 9(5).
- [20] Spivak, G. C. (1981). *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(2).
- [21] Tally, J. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge University Press.
- [22] Toit, L. du., & Chimakonam, J. O. (2018). *African philosophy and the epistemic marginalization of women*. Routledge.
- [23] Tumbade, U. J., & Ingle, P. (2023). Myth of Draupadi depicted in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi. *LangLit*, 9(3).
- [24] Yadav, S. (2023). Thematic terrains of race, culture and identity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *LangLit*, 9(3).